



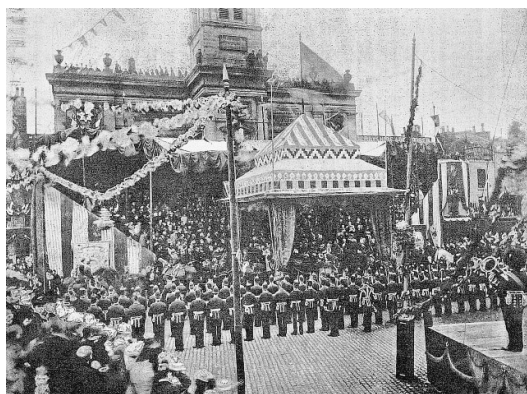
## THOUGHTS FOR PALM SUNDAY

28 MARCH 2021

*Triumphal entries*  
Mark 11:1-11



When I think about triumphal entries into cities, I imagine something Roman, where the conquering general was granted a ‘triumph’ on his return to Rome, with a large procession, and lots of newly enslaved people involved. The tradition has continued. Tuesday evening’s ‘Zoom’ service to mark the first anniversary of the first plague lockdown concluded with John Ellerton’s hymn, *The day thou gavest, Lord, has ended*, surprisingly, given its warning in the last verse about the fragility of human empires, a favourite of Queen Victoria’s, and that made me think about her, and her visit to Derby in 1891, when she laid the foundation stone of the new Derbyshire Royal Infirmary, and granted the title ‘Royal’ to it.



This was a very lavish affair, thanks to the provision of the then Mayor, Alfred Seale Haslam, who received a knight-hood (on the platform at Derby Midland) for his efforts, and the picture shews the stand set up in front of the Guildhall, with everyone eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Queen. There were ceremonial arches on the route from the Midland Station, past the Infirmary and into the Market Place, so it must have seemed like a real triumphal entry, with crowds cheering her passing-by right along the route.

All of this is a very far cry from the events described in today's gospel reading, in some ways. The Mayor of Derby had gone out of his way to provide the lavish decorations for the Queen's visit, whereas the crowds just took off their cloaks, or cut down palm branches from the neighbouring trees to make a fuss when Jesus arrived. No doubt the Queen's carriage had been ordered well in advance, and no effort would have been spared in grooming the horses and providing the attendants with the smartest possible uniforms, but for Jesus, he made his own provision, in the strange, miraculous way of 'borrowing' a colt as he approached Jerusalem. (Mark, unlike Matthew or Luke, both of whom also record the incident, makes a point of adding the promise that the colt will be returned 'immediately', using again that word so much loved of Mark.) But one thing both 'entries' share, is the cheering crowds. In Derby's case they were clearly well orchestrated – this was Derby's big day – but in Jesus' case, the crowd seems to form spontaneously.



Some of the people must have been eye-witnesses to what he had said and done, and a great many more must have heard about him, and they flocked to mark his entry into the city when they heard the rumour of his approach. I suppose that is not as surprising as it might at first seem, as the people were on the lookout for a new leader, a new David, someone who would help lift the oppressive yolk of the Roman regime that controlled their land, and perhaps they had greeted other potential leaders who appeared to offer the promise of salvation in a similar way. There was a sort of grandeur in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, but it was of the sort made by ordinary folk, which contrasts markedly with the spectacle of Queen Victoria's visit to Derby. S. Matthew, ever keen to bed his gospel account in its Jewish roots, alone among the gospel writers links the nature of Jesus' entry to Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah and Zechariah.

I have often, following in the steps of many others, drawn a contrast between the crowd's shouts of acclamation on Palm Sunday ("Hosannah! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosannah in the highest!") with their Good Friday shouts of condemnation ("Crucify him! Crucify him!"), but this really goes to the heart

of the passion story. Crowds are funny things, they represent a common view, but they represent no individual. They are changeable, and the change can come very swiftly.



Peterloo massacre

We have seen this recently in England, with peaceful gatherings suddenly turning angry, and, over history, governments have been very nervous about the formation of crowds, recognising their potential for bringing about disorder, and, more fundamentally, radical change. In the case in Jerusalem, the fickleness of the crowds exposes the restlessness at the heart of human society, perhaps even the restlessness in each human heart – the vision of amazing and wonderful possibilities, but yet the desire to maintain the predictability of the *status quo*, no matter that it enshrines much that is amiss. If Palm Sunday represents the crowd's glimpse of the possibilities, Good Friday's actions surely represents their desire for stability. Yet, as we know, God's intention for Good Friday was more revolutionary than the crowd could possibly have imagined when they played their part in bringing it to pass. The overthrow of the world's order is what Good Friday is all about, but to dwell on that today is to anticipate. Let's stick for now with the part crazed, part homespun, part glorious entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, with the crowds cheering, and the prospect of who knows what to come.

The Queen-Empress' celebrated visit to Derby came at the height of Britain's imperial power and, with hindsight, looks like a vainglorious show.



*Entry into Jerusalem; Pietro Lorenzetti, c.1320*

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem could so easily have been forgotten, had it not been a part of the story of creation's salvation.

*So be it, Lord: thy throne shall never,  
like earth's proud empires, pass away;  
thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever,  
till all thy creatures own thy sway.*

Clive Lemmon